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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TASHKENT 000248

SIPDIS  
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG  
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY  
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PASS TO AMCONSUL HYDERABAD

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI ECON KCOR PINR UZ

SUBJECT: How the Kagan Munitions Explosions Saved a Neighborhood and Other Tales from Bukhara

REF: a) A.) 08 TASHKENT 862, b) B.) 08 TASHKENT 452

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CLASSIFIED BY: Timothy P Buckley, Second Secretary; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloff met informally in Tashkent with two English language professors from Bukhara State University on several social occasions between February 27 - March 1. Both are talented and highly motivated teachers who have a good pulse on community life from their vantage point in Bukhara's only university. They also reside in the same neighborhood north of the UNESCO-designated Bukhara Old City where the Provincial Governor planned to use eminent domain powers to tear down homes in favor of park space and commercial buildings until the July 2008 explosions at the munitions depot in nearby Kagan diverted money and resources. The teachers also discussed economic conditions, education, retail trends, and Tajik identity in the historic Silk Road city. Word of the world economic crisis is slowly spreading on the streets of Bukhara, and already difficult times could get even tougher. End summary.

Peace Corps Connection  
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¶2. (C) Poloff formerly served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bukhara from 2002-04, where he taught English classes. Two English language professors at Bukhara State University visited Tashkent on February 27-March 1 and had several informal discussions with poloff in a social setting. Official scrutiny makes it difficult to have a casual and open conversation with former contacts in Bukhara, so this was a good opportunity for poloff to assess life in his former Peace Corps site. Both teachers are fluent English speakers, highly motivated to identify resources for their students, and receive official salaries of about USD 100 per month.

How the Kagan Explosions Saved the Day for One Neighborhood  
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¶3. (C) Both teachers live in a neighborhood north of the UNESCO-designated Bukhara Old City and one lives along a main road linking Bukhara with the highway to Tashkent that serves as a city gateway. She comes from an affluent family whose father runs a successful construction company, and the comfortable homes in the area are well-maintained behind characteristically Uzbek gates and walls. Last spring all the residents in the neighborhoods along the street were notified that the Hokimiat (Government) of Bukhara was planning a major beautification project to improve the city's image to visitors. That meant their homes would be torn down and residents offered compensatory plots of land on which to build new homes. These plots would be in distant, undesirable areas of the city near the desert and there would be insufficient compensation to actually rebuild. Angry groups of residents took their protest to the provincial government -- "not with placards and picket signs, of course, but quietly" -- to air their grievances.

¶4. (C) Bukhara is known for heavy-handed urban renewal projects, including the clumsy restoration of several ancient gems that define the city's character. Guided by a Soviet-era regard for monumental boulevards, colossal open spaces, and sterile order, the government steamrolled most of the charm out of the Naqshbandi Shrine, an important Sufist site, and renovated the Chor Baqr mausoleum complex until it was "beautiful" and devoid of interest. A new road and medical institute were also carved into the street grid a few years ago, and there were reports last year of private merchants losing their storefronts so the Kolhoz Bazaar, the city's largest, could be reconstructed as a faux tourist site. The municipal soccer stadium was hastily constructed in 2000 for a national athletic event hosted by Bukhara, and teachers fumed that their salaries were docked or withheld for several years thereafter since it broke the bank. The urban planning process is top-down and there is no opportunity for public input or community review, so residents concluded their homes were doomed when officials made plans to bulldoze the neighborhoods in favor of a large new park and a series of large commercial structures (none of which was publicly identified as a community vision in any organized

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process). The street would also have been widened into suitably Presidential proportions since Karimov has a residence in the area (which is used only on the rare occasions he is in Bukhara).

¶5. (C) The July 2008 explosions at the Kagan munitions depot, which rocked Bukhara for days (reftel), changed the doomed neighborhood's fortunes, at least for the time being. Stakeholders learned that all of the provincial resources were redirected to Kagan in the aftermath of the explosions. The professor whose family is in the

construction business noted that the provincial government is keeping all companies busy with projects in the Kagan area, which is 12 kilometers from Bukhara. There is a sense that the momentum for the grand urban renewal project has diminished as all eyes turned to Kagan, much to the delight of the targeted neighborhood. Even though the depot was a military-run facility with World War II-era munitions, the Provincial Government is eager to erase all traces of the Kagan disaster that took place on its turf lest it be seen as responsible. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Bukhara Hokim is the longest-serving governor in Uzbekistan (ref B), while the President tends to frequently fire most of the other governors for poor performance.

#### Shuttle Traders Change the Retail Landscape

16. (C) Both professors noted the rising prevalence of shuttle traders in Bukhara and credited them for diversifying the selection of goods available in stores and bazaars. In a city with very little besides the tourist trade, many Bukharans try to earn a living by traveling abroad to buy products that cannot otherwise be found locally and sell them at a mark-up. Kazakhstan is the easiest destination but has recently been augmented by Turkey and China. Turkey lifted visa requirements for Uzbeks (and most other Central Asian nationals), and it is easy to get to Istanbul to stock up on goods and return. The professors raved about all the Turkish-made clothes that can be found now in Bukhara, "which are stylish at accessible prices." Although the Central Asian states did not reciprocate the visa waiver for Turks it appears that the move may be paying off for Turkey through increased market penetration in Central Asia. China is becoming a more common destination for Bukharan merchants, who sometimes go overland or by plane to Urumchi but also fly regularly from Tashkent to Beijing to do wholesale shopping.

#### Economic Worries

17. (C) The global economic crisis still seems like a distant concept for average Bukharans, but they have heard enough to know that the world economy -- and particularly in Russia and Kazakhstan -- is in the doldrums. The economy was poor in Bukhara even when it was sizzling elsewhere, so Bukharans know they should be afraid. One of the professor's husband works as a taxi driver but is finding the competition stiff, with too many taxis on the road and not enough passengers. Many migrant workers return home each winter from jobs in Russia or Kazakhstan and invest their hard currency in a car, which they then drive around as an unlicensed taxi in the off-months. Year-round drivers worry that the usual winter glut of taxis will now remain in spring as workers decide not to go abroad or realize there will not be enough work. The teachers are already hearing reports through their students that workers who have been remitting solid sums of up to USD 750 per month are now only sending back USD 250, and there are concerns Russia will begin to deport foreign migrant workers as jobs for its own citizens dry up.

#### Students Thirst for English Courses...

18. (C) Both professors previously served as counterparts and mentors for Peace Corps Volunteers and commented on how much the interaction with American volunteers is missed. Even though many foreign tourists visit Bukhara, they said it is not easy to find opportunities for sustained contact with native English speakers.

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English courses remained popular even after the U.S. fell from favor in the state-controlled press as the bilateral relationship deteriorated, but students and teachers lamented the reduction in educational exchange opportunities. Students are particularly interested in preparation for the IELTS exam (International English Language Testing System, the British equivalent of TOEFL), which is a prerequisite for admission to the two most prestigious universities in the country in the eyes of Bukharan students: Westminster University and Singapore University (the latter is a newcomer to the scene). Both professors supplement their meager official salary by offering private IELTS preparation courses, for which they charge up to 30,000 soum (USD 21) per month. These extra classes therefore end up being their real bread and butter, and part of the reason they visited Tashkent was to buy more books to support their private lesson curriculum. Interestingly, the venue for these private courses is in their regular classrooms at the state university, which they have to arrange by paying kickbacks to the appropriate department chair and/or dean.

#### ...as the Education Ministry Reduces English Groups

19. (C) Despite the high demand for English classes, both professors complained that, beginning in the September 2008 academic year, the Ministry of Education cut the number of authorized program slots "for all specialist higher education programs," which includes foreign language study. The freshman class is substantially smaller as a result, and as the bigger groups graduate they predict that some teaching positions will have to be cut due to lack of students. The reason, according to these teachers, is that the government knows there are an insufficient number of jobs for graduates to be placed in. When asked what aspiring students are doing, they responded that "they are forced to sit around and do nothing for at least another year until they can try again." This has always been true to some extent, and poloff remembers students who missed the crucial scholarship threshold on admittance exams and waited another year rather than accept a slot as a paying student, which many just could not afford. Reduced opportunities to study could increase the number of disaffected young people, especially if the poor world economy makes it difficult to find jobs in Russia or Kazakhstan as an alternative.

#### Tajik Identity Strong but Localized

10. (C) Like a majority of native Bukharans, these professors are both ethnic Tajiks and speak Tajik as a native language. However, one noted "our Tajik is a dead language," and explained that Uzbek, Russian, and even English words are permeating the Bukharan Tajik dialect with each generation. There are no longer any Tajik schools in the community, so it is only spoken at home and mostly in the historic old city. "Uzbek has now become the language of the suburbs," one of the teachers said without any hint of sadness. They report that Bukharans still see themselves as Tajik people,

but it is a very localized identity. They know their native tongue is related to Persian but they note that they cannot really understand the Iranian pop music they hear, instead preferring Russian, Turkish, and American chart-toppers. Their Uzbekistan passports (which in this part of the world list nationality) indicate they are ethnic Uzbek, since their grandparents wisely chose to report themselves as Uzbeks during the Soviet era. "I know that my future is as part of Uzbekistan," one teacher commented, adding that "and even the Tajik spoken in Tajikistan is so different for us." Nonetheless, they both feel discriminated against by the Uzbek majority, especially when they come to Tashkent, where they say Uzbeks can tell their identity by their facial features.

Comment:

11. (C) While the above information only represents the points of view of two English professors in Bukhara, their insights provide

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an interesting glimpse into everyday life in this unique pocket of Uzbekistan. Current global events are always a little hazy in this isolated and timeless city, but residents seem to be getting word of possible trickle-down problems due to the world economic slowdown. Another possible impact could be fewer tourists if Westerners have less disposable income and think more about saving instead of taking that exotic trip on the Great Silk Road. Those that do brave the visa restrictions and inconvenient travel conditions may be buying fewer carpets and antique samovars, which would further pinch Bukhara at a time when more migrant workers are staying home. In the meantime, resourceful Bukharans will do what they need to do to get by and create opportunities for themselves. BUTCHER

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